

Inspired by the Devil, with Heavenly Results

June 5, 2013

The devil was the inspiration in Miranda Cuckson and Blair McMillen's recent performance at the Columbia University palazzo-fashioned Italian Academy. Cuckson's beautifully demure pale peach dress and warm stage presence did not scream "Beelzebub," but the duo's uncanny sounds—played with fitting mischievousness—did speak of otherworldly diabolical activities.

Tastefully chosen contemporary works by living Italian composers, such as Salvatore Sciarrino and Oscar Bianchi, were punctuated by Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Sonata in g minor, "*Devil's Trill*." Cuckson and McMillen gave obvious thought to each work's context and passed on their findings to the audience. For instance, Tartini claims to have had a dream starring Lucifer on the violin. Upon awaking, the composer immediately wrote down the notes from the nightly vision and lo, this sonata full of tempting themes and dancing trills was born: a little journey down into the circles of hell, albeit in a frilly Baroque manner. Cuckson's unhindered interpretation captured the mood perfectly, drawing the audience into the reddish flames as if with a long beckoning index finger stretched out beyond her curled violin scroll.

Since the fallen angel is not known for following rules, it was only fitting that a non-Italian composer's piece sneaked its way onto the program. But how well matched it was! Cuckson and McMillen gave the world premiere of Jason Eckhardt's *Strömkarl*—a rendition of Swedish impish nymphs who lure (presumably menfolk) with their irresistible violin playing. Violin and piano played with impeccable coordination, seemingly passing the role of *Strömkarl* back and forth or at times blending together in one fantastical jig. Cuckson transformed

herself into a modernist devil at play, and her surprising technical gestures grabbed the audience. The duo's tenacious interpretation only underscored the strength of Eckhardt's frenetic musical landscape.

While Cuckson performs with unpretentious star power and unbridled depth of character, McMillen plays with the delightful freedom of a child exploring the piano. His realization of Marco Stroppa's *Passacaglia Canonica*—which included ample middle pedal action, a staple box holding down keys for suspension, and a flurry of trills and fast passages—was especially captivating. Pianist and violinist gave us a hypnotic evening—devilishly induced but divinely delivered.

Daniele Sahr

<http://www.seenandheard-international.com/2013/06/05/inspired-by-the-devil-with-heavenly-results/>